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The Third Sector Is Missing

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Antonin Wagner. (2012) "Third Sector or Civil Society? A critical discourse about scholarship relating to intermediate institutions." 3.3. 299-328.

In his recent article in *Voluntary Sector Review*, Antonin Wagner (2012) has provided a subtle, nuanced analysis of the distinction and points of convergence between a third sector research paradigm composed of contending nonprofit organisations and a civil society research paradigm as interpreted by one important international scholarly association. Wagner works from a perspective that might be characterized as a mid-Atlantic disciplinary matrix of politics or political science built around the specific issue of intermediate institutions (Rodgers, 1998). In his core argument, Wagner guides the reader through a series of dualisms that work, for this reader at least, to reinforce a basic, two-sector worldview unfortunately still prevalent in mainstream political and economic science. Despite his seeming intent, his argument serves to reduce the third sector, which is given first place in his title, from a figure of autonomy and separate identity to a residual anteroom of the state; important only in its proximity to the latter. From what he casts as the opposing disciplinary lens the comparable economic paradigm of the third sector would make of the third sector an anteroom of the market, a view that is downplayed in his article. That the third sector retains no autonomous or independent space in his reckoning is most clear in Figure I, where it is portrayed as intermediary on two different dimensions: between the state and citizenry (in his treatment, largely a state-centric role) on one hand, and betwixt market and government on the other. That same Figure 1 makes no mention of Civil Society; it is presumably the dark space in between that is said to connote "intermediate organisations".

Wagner's principal thesis is that there are "two different, but mutually enhancing, research paradigms: one addressing decentralization of public administration, the other the delegation of power from citizens to their state in a system of representative governance". This may be a sound thesis in its own narrow, dualistic and disciplinary terms but it strikes me as seriously reductionistic and ignores a great deal.

His argument is well worth reading, and there is much that is sound here. Detailed arguments, for example, outline for those outside the U.S. the legal and policy context in which the term "nonprofit" is key to understanding how the "invention" of the U.S. third sector is closely (even intimately) tied to U.S. tax policy. Overall, however, his is also a partial, very incomplete view of any complete view of a third sector in the U.S. and elsewhere that leaves much of what has been seen by others out of account; most notably the independent, voluntary autonomous parts not explicitly linked to governments or markets.

No important question of third sector theory is solved by framing scholarship solely as a duel between nonprofit organization and civil society paradigms nor does posing the theory of intermediate institutions as the central theoretical figure do very much to resolve any other larger theoretical question of the character and composition of the third sector. The narrow-gauge, two-paradigm 'third sector' that Wagner derives from Tocqueville, Beveridge, Salamon, the U.S. Treasury Department and the Filer Commission is said to serve an economic function of service delivery and concern for administrative decentralization. This is contrasted with a civil society perspective tied to the International Society for Third Sector Research (ISTR) and a number of U.S. organizations and serving the political function of promoting citizenship. These are posed as alternative paradigms and, the reader may assume, the two principal paradigms in Wagner's reckoning, of a third sector in the sense of the space between state and market. That is a seriously disciplinary view. That these are also said to be two distinct research paradigms is a point well taken since there are at present significant research communities attached to each. Whether, however, they are *the* two and only principal paradigms,

and indeed, whether either deserves to be characterized as a paradigm is not explored.

In Wagner's reckoning, the third sector is the in-between space of intermediate institutions, a view based in part in his somewhat idiosyncratic reading of Tocqueville. The background comments on Tocqueville in France are useful, but in more conventional interpretations, the key function of intermediate institutions in Tocqueville does not involve any Weberian interplay of organizations or sectors at all but merely buffers the individual in democratic society from the over-weaning state (Berger, Neuhaus and Novak, 1996; Wood, 2011, pp. XX).

In an interesting but curious, digression, Wagner notes and then rejects Thomas Kuhn's preferred term, disciplinary matrices, even though constructing such a disciplinary matrix would be a more accurate reflection of what he is about here. For his is not a contribution to the interdisciplinary literature seeking to understand the third sector on its own terms. It is first and foremost a careful disciplinary introduction presumably directed at students seeking an understanding of the political study of nongovernmental organizations through a single disciplinary lens - the 'theory' (a single major proposition, really) of intermediate institutions. From that perspective, Wagner offers an interesting and nuanced, but in the end somewhat divergent, introduction to the third sector as a network of intermediate institutions betwixt markets and states. There is no definition or consideration of intermediacy, nor any discussion of the diverse national legal contexts set off by such intermediate institutions as operative political philosophies, national and international rights of association, assembly and political speech, nor any of the range of other possible implications of intermediacy for a third sector coeval with the others. (E.g., in the U.S., we now have the peculiar U.S. Supreme Court doctrines that money is speech and that corporations are people to contend with as evident in the 2012 Presidential elections.)

An interesting next step for Wagner along his chosen path would be a detailing of the range and types of empirical organisations categorized as "intermediate institutions": political parties and political movements, perhaps. He

might also tease apart all of the institutional and organizational variations often glommed together in political studies under the heading of “interest groups”. Then there is the question of what else (if anything) we should understand by his notion of intermediate institutions? Despite his emphasis on citizenship and civil society Wagner mentions no actual intermediate institutions or mechanisms that reinforce citizenship or protect citizens or serve any related intermediate role. For many observers, it is difficult to see precisely what intermediate role, for example, intercollegiate athletics, social services, social clubs, religious congregations, nonprofit cemetery companies or nonprofit marketing play with regard to citizenship. Curiously, many of the most obvious intermediate political associations have been excluded from either of Wagner’s third sector paradigms by those focused more explicitly on Tocqueville’s other category: civil association.

Until we have some clarification of what precisely Wagner means by “intermediate Institutions” and specifically whether or not his view of civil society includes or excludes largely apolitical civil associations, it is difficult to know for certain what to make of his thesis. Throughout the world, the gradual emergence of new types of organisations for social enterprise is a major interest in third sector studies, and at least a few of these have become players in international politics. But, in what sense are they intermediary?

There is also another major concern with Wagner’s approach. What we don’t get in Wagner’s article is anything like a full consideration of the current status of the term “third sector” which holds pride of place in the title. In fact, the third sector as a domain in itself receives little more than a brief and interesting historical discussion regarding the ISTR committee process by which that group embraced the term. This is, however, an attenuated third sector as viewed from the state and extending only to state policies, politics and purposes. Particularly absent from Wagner’s account is an understanding of those “civil association” portions of the third sector not standing in intermediary proximity to the state and able to act independently outside it.

Wagner clearly reveals his commitment to a two-sector understanding in

comments like his claim that the modern revival of civil society “is not the result of dissatisfaction either with the individual/collective [dualism] or with the public/private dichotomy, but can be positioned somewhere *within* the triad of citizenship, state and representative governance” (Wagner, 2012, 317 emphasis added). That combined with other dichotomies, as in his statement that nonprofit organizations “often play a mediating role not only in the economic sphere but also in the political sphere of deliberative democracies.” Such statements miss or downplays the genuine novelty of the emergent third sectors of the world.

In Wagner’s account, there is also no acknowledgement of the numerous other research paradigms or disciplinary matrices that are arguably as important as the two that he focuses on and currently extant in third sector studies. There is no consideration of their equally seminal concepts and cumulative contributions to understanding the totality of the contemporary third sector. These might include (among others and alphabetically):

- arts and culture sector (Cameron, 1991; Selwood and Brown, 2001);
- civic engagement (Kettering, 2012);
- third sector as commons (Hess, 2008; Hess and Ostrom, 2007; Lohmann, 1992);
- community organization (Briggs, 2008; Milofsky, 2008; Safford, 2009);
- communitarianism (Etzioni, et. al., 2004)
- cooperatives/cooperation (Quarter, Mook, and Armstrong, 2009; Rothschild and Whitt, 1986);
- development /NGOs (Fisher, 1998; Fisher, 2012; Lewis and Kanji, 2009);
- donor wealth and social class (Ostrower, 1997; Schervish and Havens, 2001);
- European exceptionalism (Evers and LaVille, 2004; LaVille, 2011);
- foundations (Lagemann, et. al. 1999; Lindemann, 1936 [1988]; Ostrander, 2007);
- gift theory (Titmuss, 1970; Godbout, et. al., 1997);
- grassroots organizations (Clifton and Dahms, 1993; Horton Smith, 2000);
- human services (Beito, 2000; Beito, et. al., 2002; Billis, 1984; Perlmutter, 1997);

- libertarian/independent sector (Cornuelle, 1965; issues of *Conversations on Philanthropy*);
- marketing (Sargeant and Wymer, 2008; Wymer, et. al. 2006) Issues of *International Journal of Nonprofit Marketing*);
- mutual aid/self-help/anarchism (Borkman, 1999; Gitterman and Shulman, 2005; Katz and Bender, 1966);
- nonprofit accounting (Mook, 2013);
- organizational culture (Martin, 1992);
- organization theory (Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld, 1998);
- philanthropy (Burlingame, 2004; McCully, 2008; Payton, 1988);
- planned change (Mayer, 1974; Wilson, 1964; Billis, 1980);
- policy (Phillips and Smith, 2011);
- prosocial behavior (Lohmann, 1992, pp. 237-252);
- religious organization (Cnaan, Wineburg, & Boddie, 2001; Harris, 1995; Wineburg; 2001; Wuthnow & Hodgkinson, 1990)
- small groups (Follett, 1920; Gamm and Putnam, 1999; Harrington, 2004; Olson, 1965);
- service learning (Furco and Billig, 2002);
- social economy (Bouchard, 2013; LaVille, 2011; Quarter, Mook and Armstrong, 2009; Vaillancourt, 2003);
- social enterprise (Young, 1983; Sherraden, 2005);
- spontaneous order (deZerega, 2011);
- systems (Boulding, 1990);
- volunteering (Rochester, 2012);
- voluntary action (Van Til; Horton-Smith; 1991; Horton-Smith, 1992; Smith, 1937).

There are also important concepts like coproduction, hybridity (Billis, 2010), membership (Horton-Smith, 1991; Skocpol, 2003), and social capital that have evoked great interest. Each of these perspectives and others have significant research communities, and the claim that Wagner's two 'paradigms' are components

of any of them is as plausible as the inverse claim that they are merely parts of his paradigms. A full, genuine and mature third sector paradigm will need to take all of these and more into account.

As an overview of what is most interesting, novel and researchable about the third sector, Wagner's dichotomy serves primarily to reinforce a two-sector/two discipline view of the world as long held up by students of politics and economics (Lindblom, 1988). The third sector becomes merely an alternative way of achieving political purposes (in this case, citizenship and state-subsidized service provision). For those who seek to take seriously the concept of an autonomous third sector as an institutional sphere distinguishable from both state and market toward which the ISTR definition points, and not just an adjunct of market or state, some additional framing of the third sector will be required.

The third sector is not sustainable as a largely anachronistic and historical view of a sector of intermediate institutions, viewed from a single disciplinary matrix. Largely absent is any consideration of civil association and society, culture, or practice, for example, or the multiple viewpoints of other major disciplinary matrices: sociology, anthropology or history and such practice and substantive fields as management, public administration, social work, and arts and cultural studies, not to mention contributions from all the other two dozen or so disciplinary matrices and practice fields that have shown an interest in the subject.

Although Wagner alludes to Rawls, Habermas, and Cohen and Arato, and for some reason the semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco, other past and present contributors to the rich and abundant political philosophy revitalized in the wake of Rawls and reflecting upon civic engagement, service delivery and citizen participation are not discussed. Many of these bear directly on the third sector as an autonomous and self-organizing domain and as civil society. Nor is much of this easily linked to the hypothesis of intermediate institutions. Wagner thus reduces the prospect of an independent and distinct third sector to its familiar two-sector disciplinary matrix: economics or politics? market or state (or a hybrid market-state)? citizenship or service delivery? public or private? He even reduces to this

same dominant dualism Habermas' nested, two-level path out of this conundrum - economic and political institutions inside the institutional fork of a logically prior branching of institutions and everyday life.

Wagner's theory of intermediate institutions appears to belie an assumption of the primacy of the state over the third sector and the continuing subordination of the latter in which people engaged in collective action in civil society are seen only in their role as citizens protected by intermediate institutions standing between them and the state. This expansive view of the state is a major point of contention between European and (U.S.? North American? Anglo-American?) views, and those controversies bear directly on what are to be considered intermediate institutions. Tocqueville is at the bottom of this issue, as Wagner notes, with his distinction of political and civil associations. Only one of that pairing, however, is consistently intermediary in Wagner's sense. It was only in the decades after Tocqueville in a line through Beveridge (1947), David Horton Smith (2000), Richard Cornuelle (1964), David Billis (1991), et. al., that the full significance of civil association for a genuinely autonomous third sector became clearer; a thing important not in its proximity to the state (or market order) as the terms nongovernmental and nonprofit suggest but as something *sui generis* and capable of standing genuinely apart from both.

Relative to Wagner's concern with citizenship it must be noted that a great deal of recent work on the third sector considers autonomous, even anarchic, possibilities of new types of civil association in democratic society and culture independent of the state under headings like voluntary action and philanthropy and even in competitive or antagonistic relation to the third as a nonprofit sector (c.f., McCully, 2008). Hence several third sector paradigms or disciplinary matrices from both right and left are not easily approached through the lens of intermediate institutions. They represent voluntary action in diverse forms beyond citizenship and service delivery. All of these, in addition to intermediary institutions, are where the third sector is to be found today; not just in political associations in proximity to governments and economic associations proximate to markets.

The dichotomy Wagner poses between the nonprofit organization and civil society paradigms is a useful one, but it is certainly not exhaustive. Presently, the theory of intermediate institutions is important primarily for political studies. However, one should not confuse consideration of this single grove of tall trees for the increasingly vast and expanding forest that is the contemporary third sector. Wagner has given us a careful analysis of intermediate institutions, but his mention of the third sector in this argument is incomplete and unfulfilling. In that respect, along with much analysis worthy of careful reading and consideration, Wagner has offered a prolegomenon of theoretical work on the third sector yet to be done.

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